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UNCLAS DHAKA 003854

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: BNP INFIGHTING INTENSIFIES

1. (SBU) Summary: BNP infighting has degenerated to public quarreling by ministers over patronage and other issues in Dhaka and several regional strongholds. An embarrassed BNP is trying to end the feuds, which at this point do not appear to pose a threat to the BNP's integrity or its prospects for the next election. End Summary.

2. (SBU) According to press and BNP sources, there are several prominent intra-party conflicts in Dhaka and elsewhere. On July 28, the BNP disciplined opponents of Finance Minister Saifur Rahman in his hometown of Sylhet by suspending a local party chapter dominated by his critics. On July 30, two opposing factions of a BNP front body clashed in Khulna. On August 3, a BNP forum of lawyers suspended Communication Minister Barrister Nazmul Huda for his opposition to a planned rally. Huda then absented himself from the rally which was attended by several cabinet colleagues. Recently, PM Zia relieved Education State Minister Ehasanul Haq Milon of his responsibility for the oversight of development activities in his home district, Chandpur, following complaints against him from local legislators.

3. (SBU) According to Sylhet MP Nazir Hossain, Saifur Rahman's "monopolistic" approach to BNP politics in Sylhet and the growing public perception of his son Naser Rahman's indulgence in corruption, has resulted in an erosion of Saifur's image. Hossain told us that Rahman handpicked a few "yes men" to run the party and dispensed favors to them, resulting in dissatisfaction among younger generation leaders and legislators who are now challenging his leadership. Hossain said he did not support the open criticism of Rahman, a "father figure" in the region, and warned that it might be hard for Rahman to get back his hold unless the party leadership can repair the damage. Hossain said Sylhet district chapter convener Ilias Ali, MP, enjoys support from PM's son Tarique Rahman and this might have emboldened him enough to challenge Saifur Rahman. He said the BNP leadership sees the infighting in different districts throughout the country as benefiting the opposition Awami League and is trying to settle the disputes before real damage is done.

4. (SBU) AL leader and Opposition Chief Whip Abdus Shahid, also from Sylhet, told us that the conflict between Rahman and other BNP leaders emanated from a rivalry over patronage and business. He is not sure if AL can take advantage of the BNP infighting as the AL has its own internal problems, but he is confident that some BNP supporters are switching to the AL.

5. (SBU) Shifting alliances among politicians bent on exercising power over others is becoming increasingly common, according to an attorney close to BNP leaders in Dhaka. For example, Minister Huda played a key role in appointing 19 judges to the High Court last year, sidelining Law Minister Moudud Ahmed. In response, Ahmed has now reportedly teamed up with Telecommunication Minister Aminul Haq and a few other BNP attorneys to boost his influence in legal circles. Huda's apparently odd political moves may stem from his experience during Zia's first administration, when Zia dropped him from the cabinet and the BNP standing committee for his abrupt proposal to hand over power to the appellate panel of the Supreme Court for overseeing elections.

6. (SBU) Comment: Infighting is always a factor in Bangladeshi politics, but the open involvement of cabinet ministers gives this round a new dimension. The various rifts within the BNP reveal growing dissatisfaction and impatience among party leaders and aspiring leaders, some of which is generational in nature. However, at this point, the rifts are not beyond repair provided BNP leadership can crack the whip, and there is no